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# Preface

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This study grew out of a pedagogical need. In 1985 we began designing a course called the “History of the American Deaf Community,” to be offered for the first time in the fall of 1986 at Gallaudet University. That such a course was only then being developed seems ironic in retrospect. Gallaudet University was more than one hundred years old; the first permanent school for deaf students had opened more than one hundred and fifty years earlier; and the American deaf community had formally established its first national organization more than ten decades earlier. The 1960s had seen a proliferation of courses in colleges, universities, and even secondary schools celebrating the history of various other American minorities, ethnic and religious groups, and women. Yet in the late 1980s Gallaudet University still did not offer a course that would help its students understand their past.

One reason was the lack of the solid historical research upon which any rigorous course must be constructed. With the exception of Jack Gannon, author of *Deaf Heritage*, deaf people had neither produced their own histories themselves nor attracted the attention of hearing scholars. Deafness for too long had been viewed from the perspective of pathology. In this view, deaf people are diseased or disabled—they lack the attributes of full humanity; therefore, the proper role of the scholar is not to understand deaf people’s past for what it might reveal about the human condition but instead to find a cure, a way to make this lamentable condition—and the people who suffer from it—disappear. What could be interesting or important, after all—scholars apparently assumed—about the one in one thou-

sand or one in two thousand people who lacked a primary sensory modality?

The absence of historical studies about deaf people also was due to characteristics that deaf people share with other minorities in American history. They usually have been poor, blocked by their hearing loss from the usual avenues to wealth in this society, and they have never held positions of political strength or importance because of their poverty and their small numbers. Thus their history was, and is, devalued. Those who control society write its past and attract the attention of its historians. We realized, then, that our first objective was to uncover what we could about the experience of a people who seemingly blend into society and leave no trace when they are gone.

Our early efforts concentrated on finding the documents that would tell us, and our students, how it was that deaf people in the United States had created a language and a community that had persisted for two centuries. When we found sources that helped to elucidate deaf Americans' murky past, we put them together into a reader, a collection of original documents. Although not completely satisfying, for only the deaf elite—those who were educated and literate—left behind written records, we hoped that this would form the basic reading material of our course and at least provide a beginning for deeper historical study.

It failed. Documents collected from sources up and down the East Coast, from Duke University to the archives of the American School for the Deaf, were simply too opaque for undergraduate students untrained in documentary analysis. They caught glimpses of their past, to be sure, but its outlines, the flow of events, personalities, and ideas that bound the deaf community into something more than a group of disparate individuals, did not take form in the students' minds. This narrative is our attempt to overcome that problem and to provide a coherent look at some aspects of the process whereby deaf Americans became the American deaf community.

The process began long before Europeans arrived on the shores of North America. The first chapter includes a brief overview of the intellectual currents that provided a basis for understanding deafness before the age of Enlightenment. The penultimate chapter concludes with the early years of the twentieth century, and the last chapter, or epilogue, provides an overview and a taste of things to come as deaf people continue to define their place within American history.

The bulk of the text, however, concerns itself with the nineteenth century. It was during this one hundred years that a revolution in the lives of deaf Americans occurred, when deaf people forged themselves into something more than a collection of individuals. For the first time, they confronted the hearing world with the strength of an organized group, and they developed strategies to cope with the unique situation in which they found themselves. As one of their leaders, Olof Hanson, wrote in the late nineteenth century, deaf people were “foreigners among a people whose language they [could] never learn.”

Despite Hanson’s comment, this is not a story of failure but one of success. The striking thing to us is what deaf people accomplished; the insight and realism that guided their search for full and rewarding lives stands in stark contrast to the usual picture of the pitiable deaf-mute, forever alone and incapable of communicating with other humans. Some deaf Americans have been isolated and deprived of the rewards of social intercourse, but most have not. Certainly, the deaf individuals whose history we have been able to discover do not fit the popular conception. Our goal with this text, then, has been to bring this historical reality out into the open where it can be understood and examined by hearing and deaf people alike.